

# **Fostering Friendships, Curbing Bullying**

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By adopting a proactive approach to eliminating teasing and bullying, in the early grades, schools can encourage positive relationships and mutual respect among students.

In a kindergarten classroom, children add words to a Same/Different chart to understand human commonalities and differences in a positive way. First graders draw and dictate stories about a time when they had the courage to stand up for a friend. Second graders work in groups to illustrate their class rules about how to get along. In another 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom, students have built a block wall, with each block representing a barrier to friendship. They problem solve about what they can do to take away each block. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom, students role-play a story about a girl and boy who are being teased because they want to be friends.

All these scenes took place in a school where the teachers were pilot-testing curricular activities developed as part of a project on a gender-based teasing and bullying. Teachers promoted positive friendships and an acceptance of differences among primary grade students who are at an age when teasing and bullying are common reactions to perceived differences among peers. The teachers found that integrating the topic into the curriculum had beneficial effects on actions among students. As one school administrator stated, "We were able to take teasing and bullying out of the moment and provide students with language to use in a discussion that was not charged with emotion."

## **Why Focus on the Early Grades?**

Our project team developed classroom activities to help teachers in grades K-3 take a proactive, gender-sensitive approach to teasing and bullying. We believe that the antecedents of peer-to-peer sexual harassment may well be

found in young children's teasing and bullying behavior (Stein, 1995). Yet often this behavior is tolerated and excused as part of a typical stage of childhood or as a time when "boys are just being boys." Teachers rarely ask whether this early behavior may have something to do with later interactions and thus miss an important opportunity for intervention.

Whether or not teasing and bullying take root and grow into more pernicious behavior, they deserve attention. Teasing and bullying are harmful and create a classroom climate of fear that negatively affects a child's ability to learn and a teacher's ability to teach (Ross, 1996). Learning to respect others and to contribute to their well-being are not easy tasks for young children who tend to be egocentric in their thinking. However, these skills are essential in promoting children's sense of connectedness to others and to the world around them (Levin, 1994).

## **What Our Research Told Us.**

We conducted classroom observations, interviews with students, and focus groups with teachers and parents in 25 K-3 classrooms in racially, culturally, and economically diverse public schools in New York and Framingham, Massachusetts. Our research revealed information in 3 areas.

### **Children Yearn for Adults to Intervene.**

**The role of gender.** Gender plays a subtle and important role in young children's teasing and bullying behavior - not so much in the *content* of the teasing and bullying, but in the fact that both boys and girls are teased and bullied more by boys. In our study, boys initiated more than three times as many incidents as girls, a finding in keeping with the growing body of research on bullying.

As we found in our interviews with children, this gender difference does not go unnoticed. In the words of one kindergartner, “Boys usually chase girls, because that’s what boys - do – boys chase.”

**Teachers Response.** In general, researchers have found that teachers do relatively little to stop bullying behavior (Olweus, 1993). In our study, teachers or other adults, although present at all times, were uninvolved in or ignored 71 percent of the observed incidents. From our interviews with children, we know that they yearn for adults to intervene. For example, children told us that “teachers should make kids explain and make them apologize” and that “kids won’t stop until the teacher makes them.” Teachers fail to intervene in teasing and bullying incidents for various reasons: They may be unaware of the incident, want children to work things out on their own, want to discourage tattling behavior, or believe that these activities are a natural part of childhood. However, the facts that boys do initiate most incidents and that adults do not intervene are crucial. If adults do not intervene, children think that boys are being given a license to behave in this way. All children get the wrong message about acceptable gender roles, and the fostering friendships and respect between boys and girls becomes increasingly difficult.

**Teacher and Parent Concerns.** The focus group meetings indicated that both teachers and parents are aware of and concerned about bullying and teasing. An underlying theme was the need to foster positive relationships among children. Teachers reported that teasing and bullying have a negative impact on their ability to teach, that consistent school policies are needed to address such incidents, and that early intervention is important. Parents were concerned about helping their children deal with teasing and bullying, particularly when a verbal response does not stop the initiator. They were concerned about what to do when school policies conflict with their beliefs about how to address this issue.

#### **A Proactive Curricular Approach.**

Our observations, discussions with children, and meetings with teachers and parents convinced us that the topic of teasing and bullying cannot

remain part of the “hidden” or “evaded” curriculum (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, 1992). An up-front approach is essential and can take familiar forms: story time, reading, meeting-time discussions, experience charts, drawings, art projects, creative story writing, journal writing, role-playing, puppet plays, charts, and graphing (see Froschl, Sprung, & Mullin-Rinder, 1998).

**Explore Differences.** The perception of “difference” is at the root of all teasing and bullying among young children. Almost any perceived difference-gender, race, ethnicity, language, social class, disability, size - can become fodder for hurtful words and actions. For kindergartners, an age appropriate and positive way to explore the concept of human difference is to create a chart about how we are the same and different. In one class, children came up with the lists in figure 1.

*Figure 1*  
Kindergartners’ Same/Different Chart

<u>How we are the same</u>	<u>How we are different</u>
We are the same inside	Different skin color
Same age	Different design on shirt
We all have birthdays	Different language
Same school	Talk differently
Same socks	Say different things
All have eyes, fingers	Like different things/toys
And toes	Eat different foods

**Examine the Meaning of Courage.** Young students need help in moving away from a superhero image of courage. They need to understand that courage can take many forms: It takes courage not to follow the crowd; it takes courage to disagree with someone and risk that he or she might not be our friend; it takes courage to go against the social norm and break down barriers to friendships; it takes courage to stand up for someone who is target of teasing and bullying; and it even takes courage to control our own emotions and not tease and bully someone else. In one 1<sup>st</sup> grade classroom, children told stories and made drawings about when they had the courage to stand up for a friend.

**Involve Students in Rule Making.** In addition to helping with classroom management, rule making can - and should - help students understand what it takes to get along with one another, both inside and outside the classroom. Rules can be sorted into general categories, such as kindness, cooperation, safety, respect for one another, appropriate language, and conflict resolution without violence. Students are more likely to follow rules when they help develop them and when the rules are written in their own words, for example, one 3<sup>rd</sup> grader stated “Don’t exclude, or give a kind reason.” Another said, “don’t provoke, chase, or spy!”

**Promote Friendships Across Lines of Difference.** By building a wall from blocks that represent the kinds of things that keep people from being friends and by problem solving how to remove these barriers, students can explore how teasing, bullying, and social attitudes keep them from being friends. As a follow-up activity, one teacher assigned writing a “friendship poem” as homework. A student wrote about skin color as a barrier.

*Today somebody teased me for the  
Color of my skin.  
They called me dumb and had a  
Particular grin.  
I said it didn’t matter what my  
Religion or my race is.  
I said I didn’t care what the color of  
My face is.  
They said it was true.  
So now we are friends.  
And that’s how it ends.*

**Promote Friendships Between Girls and Boys.** Girls and boys encounter many barriers when they want to be friends, and it takes courage for them to go against the prevailing social norm. Role-plays can help students explore the stereotypes that get in the way of friendship. Teachers can facilitate the discussions by asking questions: What makes a good friend? Why are friends important? Can girls and boys be friends? An example of role-play follows: Joanne and David are best friends. They want to sit together in the lunchroom, but all the girls sit on one table and all the boys at the other.

When David sits with the girls, they call him “sissy.” When Joanne sits with the boys, they tease her and call her “Jo-Jo.”

**Talk About Teasing and Bullying.** The most important strategy is to talk about teasing and bullying, not just as incidents occur, but as a regular part of classroom life. As they talk about teasing and bullying, students learn to become critical thinkers. Through ongoing class discussions, they realize that the classroom is a place where they can talk about what makes them feel welcome, comfortable, and safe in school.

### **A Whole School Approach.**

Creating a climate of respect and learning takes effort on the part of the whole-school community. However, research has shown that it’s worth it. School wide intervention programs can reduce teasing and bullying and antisocial behavior in general (Olweus, 1994; Cummings & Haggerty, 1997; Grossman et al., 1997).

Support from the school’s administration is essential. A clearly stated, consistent, school wide policy, distributed to everyone in the school community, can be an effective tool in combating teasing and bullying. Parents are crucial partners in efforts to create a climate in which teasing and bullying are not acceptable behaviors. Parents need ongoing communication about what is going on in the classroom as well as suggestions for ways to communicate with their own children on the topic.

Teachers in concert with parents and the school community, play an important role in changing the school environment so that teasing and bullying incidents are not so prevalent.

By taking a proactive approach, teachers and schools have the opportunity to create a more pro-social climate in general and more positive interactions regardless of gender or other perceived differences including race, ethnicity, class, and disability. The resulting environment fosters respect and potential friendships among children who might otherwise remain apart.

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